

Agenda-Setting Research: Issues, Attributes, and Influences

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For the past three decades and now into a fourth, the agenda-setting function of mass media, first explored empirically in the United States in 1968 by McCombs and Shaw (1972), has been a major focus of mass communication research in the United States. It has also crossed the Atlantic and Pacific oceans to become more international in scope. At the same time, it has expanded from a concern with the salience or prominence of issues to the attributes of issues and candidate images—a development that moves it closer to studies of “framing” that focus on *how* issues and other objects of interest are reported by news media as well as *what* is emphasized in such reporting.

There has also been increased interest in the consequences of agenda-setting, especially for public opinion, in some studies of “priming.” More recently still, agenda-setting research has begun to take into account a kind of reverse effect labeled “agenda melding.” This chapter reviews many of these studies, including some conducted outside the United States, and discusses their relationship to studies of framing, priming, and public opinion more generally. It concludes with some recommendations for future research in the agenda-setting tradition.

Most agenda-setting research since McCombs and Shaw’s (1972) study of the 1968 U.S. presidential election has focused on the relationship between the news media’s ranking of issues (in amount and prominence of coverage) and the public ranking of the perceived importance of these same issues in various surveys, a type of research that Dearing and Rogers (1996) have called *public* agenda setting to distinguish it from studies that are concerned mainly with the causes or consequences of changes in the media agenda, which they label *media* agenda setting (for studies of the influences on media agendas) and *policy* agenda-setting (for studies of the impact of media agendas on public policy agendas).

The evidence from scores of such public agenda-setting studies is mixed, but on the whole it tends to support a positive correlation—and often a causal relationship—between media agendas and public agendas at the aggregate level, especially for relatively unobtrusive issues that do not directly impact the lives of the majority of the public, such as foreign policy and government scandal. (For the details of this evidence, beginning with the original study during the 1968 presidential election, see Dearing & Rogers, 1996; McCombs, in press; McCombs, Einsiedel, & Weaver, 1991; McCombs & Ghanem, 2001; McCombs & Reynolds, 2002; McCombs & Shaw, 1972; McCombs, Shaw, & Weaver, 1997; Protesse & McCombs, 1991; Rogers & Dearing, 1988; Shaw & McCombs, 1977; Wanta, 1997; Weaver, 1984; Weaver, Graber, McCombs, & Eyal, 1981).

Most of these studies have been conducted in the United States, with a few notable exceptions, especially in Germany as noted by Winfried Schulz (1997), who cites, among others, Brettschneider (1994), Brosius and Kepplinger (1990, 1992a, 1992b, 1995), Eichhorn (1996), Huegel, Degenhardt, and Weiss (1992), Schoenbach and Semetko (1992), and Wilke (1995). Many of these German studies involve extensive content analysis and survey data sets over months of time, providing some of the strongest evidence yet for the influence of the media agenda on the public agenda. Because this basic evidence on the agenda-setting role of the mass media has been thoroughly documented elsewhere, this chapter concentrates on the more recent developments in agenda-setting theory.

Some scholars of agenda setting have also examined the antecedents of media agendas to try to answer the question of who or what sets the media agenda (Semetko, Blumler, Gurevitch, & Weaver, 1991). This type of research has been called “agenda building” by some U.S. scholars (e.g., Gilberg, Eyal, McCombs, & Nicholas, 1980; Lang & Lang, 1981; Turk, 1986; Weaver & Elliott, 1985), and intermedia agenda setting by others, although Dearing and Rogers (1996) prefer to label it *media* agenda setting because of its focus on the media agenda as the dependent variable. This kind of agenda-setting research has been far less common than the more traditional public agenda-setting studies, but it has not been confined to U.S. researchers. In Germany, for example, Mathes and Pfetsch (1991) have studied the role of the alternative press in the agenda-building process.

More recently, scholars from a number of different countries have tried to link agenda-setting research with studies of “priming” and “framing” that examine not only *what* issues are emphasized by news media, but *how* these issues are reported and, in some cases, the effects of this reporting on public opinion as well as public concerns (McCombs, Shaw, & Weaver, 1997). The focus on the consequences of agenda setting for public opinion (often labeled “priming”) can be traced back at least to Weaver, McCombs, and Spellman (1975), who speculated in their 1972–1973 panel study of the effects of Watergate news coverage that the media may do more than teach which issues are most important—they may also provide “the issues and topics to use in evaluating certain candidates and parties, not just during political campaigns, but also in the longer periods between campaigns” (p. 471).

A SECOND LEVEL OF AGENDA-SETTING

Especially in the past decade, there have been more studies conducted outside the United States—in Britain, Germany, Israel, Italy, Japan, The Netherlands,

Spain, and Taiwan and in other countries as well. Many of these studies are described by their authors in a book published during the summer of 1997, *Communication and Democracy*, edited by McCombs, Shaw, and Weaver. Not only do these studies expand the geographical boundaries of agenda-setting research, but they also extend the focus of attention beyond issues to attributes of issues and images.

In the majority of studies to date, the unit of analysis on each agenda is an *object*, a public issue. But objects have *attributes*, or characteristics. When the news media report on public issues or political candidates, they describe these objects. But due to the limited capacity of the news agenda, journalists can present only a few aspects of any object in the news. A few attributes are prominent and frequently mentioned, some are given passing notice, and many others are omitted. In short, news reports also present an agenda of attributes that vary considerably in salience. Similarly, when people talk about and think about these objects—public issues, political candidates, etc.—the attributes ascribed to these objects also vary considerably in their salience. These agendas of attributes have been called “the second level” of agenda setting to distinguish them from the first level that has traditionally focused on issues (objects), although the term *level* implies that attributes are more specific than objects, which is not necessarily true. The perspectives and frames that journalists employ draw attention to certain attributes of the objects of news coverage, as well as to the objects themselves.

Japan

This distinction between the first and second levels of agenda setting is evident in a number of recent studies, both in the United States and in other countries. For example, Takeshita and Mikami (1995) examined both levels of agenda setting in the 1993 general election in Japan. Their content analysis showed that the main issue of the election was political reform, but the system-related attributes of this issue were emphasized over the ethics-related attributes, and the same was true in their survey of the public, suggesting a second-level agenda-setting effect.

In another study of environmental issues in Japan, Mikami, Takeshita, Nakada, and Kawabata (1995) also found support for agenda setting at both the first and second levels. From these studies, Takeshita (1997) concluded, “By designating what aspects of a certain issue to attend to, agenda setting at the subissue level can influence the perspective with which people see the issue as a whole” (p. 23).

Takeshita (1997) also links second-level agenda setting with the concept of framing (as conceptualized by both sociologists and psychologists), noting that as a result of a focus on attribute-agenda setting, “agenda-setting research and framing research are exploring almost the same problem—that of the reality-definition function of the media” (p. 24). And Ogawa (2001), in an experimental study, concluded that quantitative agenda setting can be influenced by the quality of the information about an issue as well as the quantity of such information. In other words, how an issue is presented can influence how salient the issue is considered to be. In theoretical terms, this is a relationship between the second level of the media agenda, attribute salience, and the first level of the public agenda, object salience. McCombs (1997) named this relationship “compelling arguments.”

Israel

Another scholar who sees links between the construction of social reality and agenda setting is Anat First of Israel. She suggests that the second level of agenda setting “can be understood best as a process of reality construction by individuals who combine elements of news with what they personally observe of life and events to make a sort of blended reality” (First, 1997, p. 41).

First studied the agenda-setting role of Israeli television news in the social construction of views about the Israeli–Arab conflict during the 1987 uprising by Arabs in Israel for greater autonomy. She focused on one main issue, the Israeli–Arab conflict (the Intifada), and three main attributes—intensity, complexity, and solvability. She found that audiences seemed to learn about these aspects of the issue approximately the way television presented them. Her conclusion is that “one may not need media exposure to learn of the biggest issues, but one does need media exposure if one is to understand the ways in which the mass media frame, and the public learns, about issues” (First, 1997, p. 50).

Italy

Andreina Mandelli has studied the agenda-setting influence of media coverage on short-term changes in political values by drawing on survey data and content analyses conducted during a major scandal (Tangentopoli) in Italian politics (Mandelli, 1996; Semetko & Mandelli, 1997). Her main hypothesis predicted that the news media had an important role in setting not only the public agenda of political issues, but also the agenda of public values. Her analysis found that media emphasis and framing had an important role not only in changing the Italian public’s electoral opinions, through first- and second-level agenda setting, but also in bringing about electoral dealignment in the country following the 1992 government corruption scandal. Her study raises the question of whether political values can be considered “attributes” of a political issue. If not, then perhaps values can be conceptualized as objects in the same way that issues can.

Taiwan

A second-level agenda-setting study in Taiwan, by King (1997), examined the influence of coverage by three major newspapers on voters’ images of the three candidates for mayor of Taipei in 1994. His agenda of attributes included 12 categories representing a variety of personal and political attributes. King found that candidate attributes emphasized by the press became salient features of the images of the candidates held by voters, at least for the substantive dimension of images (political ability, experience, leadership, and political style), if not the affective dimension (favorable or unfavorable ratings of each attribute). For the affective dimension of images, voters’ characteristics (such as age, partisan identification, education, and ethnicity) were stronger predictors of evaluations than media exposure. In other words, media influence was greater on the salience of perceived attributes of candidates than on how these attributes were evaluated, in line with many other studies that have found greater cognitive than affective influence from news media exposure and attention (Weaver, 1996).

Spain

Both levels of agenda setting also were examined in Spain during the 1995 elections for provincial parliaments and mayors of larger cities (Lopez-Escobar, Llamas, McCombs, & Lennon, 1998; McCombs, Llamas, Lopez-Escobar, & Rey, 1997). The traditional, first-level hypothesis asserted that the pattern of news coverage of issues affecting the city of Pamplona would be reflected in the public agenda of issues, and examination of the correlations between agendas of six local issues revealed significant relationships. The correlation of the public agenda with *Diario de Navarra* was +0.73; with *Diario de Noticias*, +0.63; and with local television news, +0.56.

At the second level, as in the Taiwan study by King, data on the candidates' images in the voter survey and in the content analysis were organized along two dimensions—(1) *substantive*, which included candidates' ideology and issue positions, qualifications and experience, and personal characteristics and personality; and (2) *affective*, where candidates were described in positive, negative, or neutral terms. Taking Lippmann's idea of the pictures in our heads almost literally for the substantive dimension, the analyses compared the salience of 15 elements (5 parties \times 3 attributes) in the media coverage with the public's collective picture of the candidates. This complex matching of media salience with public salience across 15 elements was a tough test of second-level agenda setting, and the evidence was mixed.

For the parliamentary candidates, the match between the agenda of the newspapers and the agenda of attributes held by the public was +0.57 for one paper and +0.27 for the other. For the mayoral candidates, there was little correspondence between the two agendas. But for television news, which paid more attention to the mayoral election, there was a correlation of +0.41 for the mayoral candidate image agendas, but little association with the public's images of the parliamentary candidates. A similar pattern was found for the affective dimension of candidate images, with the match between the newspaper and public agendas stronger for parliamentary candidates than for mayoral candidates (+0.66 and +0.86, compared to +0.34 and +0.44) and the match between the TV agenda and the public agenda stronger for the mayoral candidates (+0.59) than for the parliamentary candidates (+0.18).

Another study in Spain in 1996 examined the influence of the major news and advertising media on the images of the three candidates for prime minister (McCombs, Lopez-Escobar, & Llamas, 2000). In this election, the conservative Popular Party successfully challenged Spain's 12-year incumbent Socialist prime minister, and a third major candidate represented a coalition of far-left parties. In line with the earlier 1995 study in Pamplona, the image attributes of the candidates were analyzed along both substantive and affective dimensions. But unlike 1995, where the local candidates for each office were aggregated, the 1996 study examined the second-level agenda-setting process separately for each of the three major candidates. In a particularly demanding test of agenda-setting effects, this study also combined the substantive and affective dimensions into a single 15-cell descriptive matrix (5 substantive categories \times 3 affective categories).

The correlations between the voters' attribute agendas and a local newspaper were +0.87, +0.82, and +0.60. For *El Pais*, a national newspaper, the correlations were +0.84, +0.83, and +0.86 for the three candidates. The median correlation for all six comparisons between the voters and two local newspapers (3 candidates \times 2

newspapers) was +0.70. For the six comparisons with two national newspapers the median correlation was +0.81. For the two national TV news services it was +0.52. For three comparisons with the political ads on television, the median was +0.44. Taken together, these correlations, especially those for the newspapers, offer significant support for second-level agenda setting of attributes of candidates.

Germany

In an extensive content analysis and survey study of the 1990 German national election, Schoenbach and Semetko (1992) found evidence that the framing of an issue, in addition to frequency of coverage, can influence the overall salience of the issue—in other words, that second-level agenda setting can influence first-level. Looking at the salience of two major issues in this election (problems in the former East Germany and the environment), the authors found that interest in and exposure to television news were associated with increased salience of these issues, but for the *Bild*, the national tabloid newspaper, exposure was correlated negatively with later salience of former East German problems, even though coverage of this issue increased in the weeks leading up to the survey.

Schoenbach and Semetko (1992) explain this by the actual tone of the coverage—the affective dimension of second-level agenda setting. During the early period of the campaign almost all *Bild* stories on developments in the former GDR (East Germany) were laced with very optimistic claims and predictions, thus diminishing the importance of the problems in the former GDR in the eyes of the readers. The authors conclude that whereas most agenda-setting studies focus only on the amount and prominence of issue coverage, their study suggests that the tone of the coverage is also an important factor. If one conceives of “tone” as the increased salience of certain attributes or aspects (positive in this case) of an issue, then this is a case of second-level agenda setting influencing first-level.

United States

Another case of this relationship, but in the opposite direction, was discovered in Texas from 1992 to 1994 by Ghanem (1996, 1997). During that time, the percentage of respondents to the Texas Poll who named crime as the most important problem facing the country went from 2% to more than one third, an unusually high level for any poll asking about the most important problem (MIP). Ironically, during that same time period when public concern over crime rose to such high levels, crime statistics indicated that the rate of crime was actually declining. Crime coverage in the news was a likely source of rising public concern, and comparisons found that the pattern of crime coverage in Texas newspapers was reflected in subsequent public concern. Across 2.5 years the match between the pattern of crime coverage and the trend in public concern was +0.70 (Ghanem, 1996; Ghanem & Evatt, 1995).

More interesting than this, however, was the match between the frequency of crime stories in the newspaper that framed crime as a threat to the average person and the overall salience of the crime issue (+0.78), and likewise for those stories where the crime occurred locally or in the state of Texas (+0.73). Whereas stories of distant gang fights and murder in New York City were not especially worrisome to Texans, stories about local crime, robberies of ordinary persons in broad daylight, and random shootings were of high concern to them—a clear example of framing

(second-level agenda setting) increasing the overall salience of crime (first-level agenda setting).

FRAMING

Tankard, Hendrickson, Silberman, Bliss, and Ghanem (1991, p. 3) have described a media frame as “the central organizing idea for news content that supplies a context and suggests what the issue is through the use of selection, emphasis, exclusion and elaboration.” Entman (1993) argues that “to frame is to *select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation and/or treatment recommendation* for the item described” (p. 52, original italics). McCombs (1997) has suggested that in the language of the second level of agenda setting, “framing is the selection of a restricted number of thematically related attributes for inclusion on the media agenda when a particular object is discussed” (p. 6). He argues that there are many other agendas of attributes besides aspects of issues and traits of political candidates, and a good theoretical map is needed to bring some order to the vastly different kinds of frames discussed in various studies. This he sees as a major challenge and opportunity for agenda-setting theory in its exploration of the second level.

Not all scholars agree that second-level agenda setting is equivalent to framing, at least not to more abstract, or macro-level, framing. Gamson (1992) has conceived of framing in terms of a “signature matrix” that includes various condensing symbols (catch phrases, taglines, exemplars, metaphors, depictions, visual images) and reasoning devices (causes and consequences, appeals to principles or moral claims). Some would argue that second-level agenda setting is more similar to the first part of this matrix than to the second, because it is easier to think of condensing symbols as attributes of a given object but more difficult to think of reasoning devices as attributes.

Of course, it depends on how framing is defined. A study, by de Vreese, Peter, and Semetko (2001), concerns the framing in news about the introduction of the Euro monetary unit. This study defines frames in terms of amount of conflict over the introduction of the Euro and the economic consequences of adopting it in various countries. Amount of conflict seems to fit the dictionary definition of an attribute (an inherent characteristic or quality), whereas economic consequences seem to go beyond what would usually be considered an attribute, although they could be considered a related aspect of the issue.

Another study, by Callaghan and Schnell (2001), deals with how the news media framed elite policy discourse concerning the issue of gun control. These scholars defined frames as stated or implied arguments. Examples included “Guns deter crime,” “Guns don’t kill, people do,” and “There is a constitutional right to bear arms.” These arguments, or frames, seem to go beyond the commonly held definition of attribute because they are more than just characteristics or qualities of the issue. They could be considered aspects of *presentation* of the issue, however, if not attributes of the issue itself.

In addition to debates over what constitutes an attribute, Scheufele (2000) argues that the theoretical premises of agenda setting and framing are different—that agenda setting (and priming) relies on the theory of attitude accessibility by increasing the salience of issues and thus the ease with which they can be

retrieved from memory when making political judgments, whereas framing is based on prospect theory that assumes that subtle changes in the description of a situation invoke interpretive schemas that influence the interpretation of incoming information rather than making certain aspects of the issue more salient. As Scheufele (2000) notes, however, “What remains unanswered is the question of whether the framing of an issue—regardless of its perceived salience—might have a significant effect on evaluations of political actors that goes above and beyond priming” (p. 313). He recommends future empirical research on this subject, and we concur that such research is needed.

Nevertheless, there are similarities between second-level agenda setting and framing, even if they are not identical processes. Both are more concerned with how issues or other objects (people, groups, organizations, countries, etc.) are depicted in the media than with *which* issues or objects are most (or least) frequently covered. Both focus on the most salient or prominent aspects or themes or descriptions of the objects of interest. Both are concerned with ways of thinking rather than objects of thinking and with the details of the pictures in our heads rather than the broader subjects.

One primary difference between the two approaches, in addition to those mentioned above, is that second-level agenda-setting research has been more concerned with the relationship between media and audience ways of thinking than has framing research, which has concentrated on how the media cover and present various subjects.

PRIMING

As mentioned earlier, a number of scholars have become interested in the effects of media agenda setting on public opinion and government policy. The focus on the consequences of agenda setting for public opinion (often labeled “priming”) can be traced back at least to Weaver et al. (1975, p. 471), who speculated, in their study of the effects of Watergate news coverage, that the media may suggest which issues to use in evaluating political actors but who did not use the term “priming” to describe this process.

Their speculation was supported a decade later when Iyengar and Kinder (1987), in controlled field experiments, linked television agenda-setting effects to evaluations of the U.S. president in a demonstration of what some cognitive psychologists have called “priming”—making certain issues or attributes more salient and more likely to be accessed in forming opinions. Weaver (1991) also found that increased concern over the federal budget deficit was linked to increased knowledge of the possible causes and solutions of this problem, stronger and more polarized opinions about it, and more likelihood of engaging in some form of political behavior regarding the issue, even after controlling for various demographic and media use measures. As Willnat (1997, p. 53) points out, the theoretical explanations for these correlations, especially between agenda setting and behavior, have not been well developed, but the alliance of priming and agenda setting has strengthened the theoretical base of agenda-setting effects by providing “a better understanding of how the mass media not only tell us ‘what to think about’ but also ‘what to think’ (Cohen 1963).”

There have been at least two information-processing models developed to explain priming. One, by Higgins and King (1981), suggests that the energy or action

potential of a mental category is increased whenever the category is activated by exposure to related concepts or ideas. Another, by Wyer and Srull (1986, 1989), assumes information is stored so that the more recently acquired and used information is placed back at the top of the “storage bin,” making it more accessible in memory. Regardless of the actual process, the central idea of priming is that people routinely draw on information that is most salient, or accessible, when making a judgment or expressing an opinion. Because agenda-setting is concerned mainly with the salience of issues and attributes, there is an obvious link with priming. Iyengar and Simon (1993) argue that priming is really an extension of agenda-setting in affecting the criteria by which political leaders are judged.

As Willnat (1997) notes, the strongest empirical support for media priming comes from experimental studies, but there have been some demonstrations of this effect under more natural conditions. Krosnick and Kinder (1990), for example, examined the priming effect of media coverage of the Iran–Contra scandal on perceptions of President Reagan in October 1986 using survey data from the 1986 National Election Study (NES), which was being conducted at the time. They compared two groups of respondents—one interviewed before the Attorney General announced that funds obtained by the U.S. government from the secret sale of weapons to Iran had been improperly diverted to the Contras (a group attempting to overthrow the Sandinista government in Nicaragua) and the other interviewed after this revelation. The findings from the NES survey indicated that respondents in the postdisclosure group gave foreign policy more weight in their evaluations of President Reagan’s overall performance than the predisclosure group did.

A later study, by Iyengar and Simon (1993), used NES surveys from 1988, 1990, and 1991 to assess the effect of public beliefs about foreign policy on evaluations of Presidents George Bush and Ronald Reagan. In 1990 and 1991, the effect of foreign policy performance was more important than economic performance in respondents’ assessments of President Bush, but the reverse was true in 1988 for President Reagan. This change in evaluation standards was attributed to news coverage of U.S. foreign policy.

In a very different political setting, Willnat and Zhu (1996) found that public opinion about Hong Kong’s last British governor was strongly influenced by news coverage of his proposals to broaden public participation in the election of the Legislative Council. Using 52 consecutive weekly polls from the fall of 1992 when the governor made his initial policy speech, Willnat and Zhu found that public opinion about his overall performance was significantly primed by the pattern of news coverage in Hong Kong’s three leading newspapers.

Wanta and Chang (1999), in a survey of Oregon residents during the early months of the Monica Lewinsky sex scandal, found that frequent newspaper readers were more likely to describe President Clinton in terms of public issues than in terms of the scandal, and these readers were more likely to have positive opinions about Clinton’s overall job performance. Among those for whom involvement in the scandal was the most salient attribute, opinions about President Clinton were more negative, suggesting a second-level agenda-setting priming effect.

Holian (2000), in an analysis of the 1981–1996 time period, from the first term of President Reagan through the first term of President Clinton, found support for his hypothesis that when the president successfully sets the national issue agenda, his public approval level increases, independent of economic factors. He analyzed the relationship over time among the agendas of *The New York Times*, *The Public Papers of the President*, and presidential approval ratings, controlling for economic

measures. He found that the president can focus public attention on issues on which his party is credible but tends to follow media reporting on issues on which the opposition party holds the advantage.

Not all scholars agree that priming is a consequence of agenda setting, however. Price and Tewksbury (1995) have argued that both agenda setting and priming rely on the same cognitive process (the increased accessibility of mental constructs in long-term memory due to media exposure) and that “agenda setting—commonly thought to be a kind of basic media effect upon which priming depends—is actually but one particular variant of priming, which is itself a far more general effect” (pp. 7–8). Scheufele (2000) also argues that both agenda setting and priming are based on the assumption of attitude accessibility and a memory-based model of information processing, but he draws a distinction between salience (or accessibility) and perceived importance of issues, even though most agenda-setting studies have treated these concepts as identical. Unlike Price and Tewksbury, Scheufele has not argued that agenda setting is a variant of priming.

It seems to us that increased salience of issues (and attributes of issues) is likely to precede opinion formation and judgment (or at least changes in opinions and judgments) and, therefore, that agenda setting is not “one particular variant of priming” but, rather, a separate process that should be distinguished from opinion formation. There seems to be much practical and theoretical value to making a distinction between increased salience of an issue (usually measured as perceived importance) and the opinions that one has regarding the issue.

Whether there is also practical and theoretical value in distinguishing between salience and perceived importance is not as clear to us at this time. This may turn out to be a distinction without a real difference, at least as far as agenda-setting and priming are concerned. Even Scheufele (2000) seems to use these terms synonymously when he writes that mass media “have the power to increase levels of importance assigned to issues by audience members. They increase the salience of issues or the ease with which these considerations can be retrieved from memory if individuals have to make political judgments about political actors” (p. 309). The evidence that Scheufele (1999) cites for a distinction between perceived importance and salience (accessibility), from Nelson, Clawson, and Oxley (1997), pertains only to framing effects, not to agenda-setting or priming. Clearly more research is needed to test whether this distinction is important for these other media effects.

BEHAVIOR

There is also evidence that media agenda-setting can affect behavior. Extensive news coverage of crime and violence, including a murder and rapes, on the University of Pennsylvania campus contributed to a significant drop in applications by potential first-year students, predominantly women, according to the university’s dean of admissions (*Philadelphia Inquirer*, 1996). This decline occurred when other comparable universities experienced an increase in applications during the same period.

News about airplane crashes and skyjackings offers another example of a link between media agendas and risk avoidance behavior (McCombs & Shaw, 1974). This study predicted that news about crashes in which 10 or more persons died or news about skyjackers’ control of an airborne plane would increase the salience of the dangers of flying. A comparison of high-salience weeks (those where there

were fatal crashes or skyjackings) with low-salience weeks for 5 years revealed that ticket sales dipped in high-salience weeks and that flight insurance sales increased.

Roberts (1992) found further evidence of a link between agenda setting and behavior in a study of the 1990 election for governor of Texas. Issue salience was a significant predictor of actual votes in this election, with 70% of the respondents' actual reported votes for governor correctly predicted by the level of issue concern over time, controlling for demographics and media reliance and attention.

In one of the most dramatic revelations of the behavioral influence of media news emphasis, Blood and Phillips (1997) carried out a time-series analysis of *New York Times* headlines from June 1980 to December 1993 and found that rising numbers of unfavorable economic headlines had an adverse effect on subsequent leading economic indicators (average weekly hours for manufacturing, average weekly initial claims for unemployment, new orders of consumer goods and materials, vendor performance, contracts and orders for plant and equipment, building permits, etc.) rather than vice versa. Blood and Phillips (1997) wrote that their findings "suggest that the amount and tone of economic news exerted a powerful influence on the economic environment and further, that the economic news agenda was generally not being set by prevailing economic conditions" (p. 107).

In a study exploring cognitive, attitudinal, and behavioral consequences of agenda setting, Weaver (1991) found that public concern about a major issue of the late 1980s (the U.S. federal budget deficit) was linked with actual behavior, such as writing a letter, attending a meeting, voting, or signing a petition, even after controlling for various demographic and media use measures.

POLICY

Another possible consequence of agenda setting is its impact on public policy, which has generally been studied more often by political scientists than by communication scholars. As Dearing and Rogers (1986) note, policy agenda setting has been of somewhat less interest to communication scholars than has media or public agenda setting because policy agenda setting involves collective political behavior as well as communication behavior and is more complex. Nevertheless, some communication scholars have explored the impact of media agenda setting on policy agendas.

David Pritchard (1986), for example, found that prosecutors in Milwaukee were more likely to plea bargain homicide cases that did not receive much newspaper coverage compared with those that got prominent coverage and thus were higher on the newspaper agenda. Paul Janensch (1982), while executive editor of *The Louisville (Kentucky) Courier-Journal and Times*, reviewed legislation passed by the Kentucky General Assembly in its 1982 session and concluded that even though major newspaper coverage does not guarantee legislative action, "I also think nursing-home reform would have been plowed under had it not been for *The Courier-Journal's* exposure of deplorable conditions in some of the homes." Janensch noted that even though the newspaper's investigative series seemed to affect legislation regarding nursing homes, auto titles, and county jails, major coverage of Louisville's dirty air and lack of vehicle emission standards did not have any impact on state government policies.

David Protesch and his colleagues at Northwestern University (1991) studied the impact of several investigative journalism reports on policy makers' perceptions

of the importance of various problems and found that each of the media investigations they studied influenced public policy making in various ways. The reports on rape made legislative changes an immediate priority and stimulated community hearings. The police brutality TV broadcasts produced fundamental revisions of regulations regarding police misconduct. The dialysis series led to a state and federal debate over the regulation of clinics and the reuse of dialyzers. On the other hand, the series on problems of toxic waste disposal at the University of Chicago did not have much impact on the agenda of policy makers but did result in swift actions being taken by the University to remedy the problem. The home health care investigation prompted the U.S. Senate to hold immediate hearings that raised significant questions, but no bills were introduced to address the problem.

In short, these studies suggest that media agendas can have substantial impact on the priorities and behavior of government policy makers, especially if an issue is nonrecurring and unambiguous, but they also suggest that the influence is sometimes from policy maker to media, rather than vice versa, and that journalists and policy makers often cooperate with each other to raise the salience of various issues and problems without first involving public opinion. As Protess et al. (1991) put it, "We find that policy-making agendas are catalyzed by the formal transactions between journalists and officials more than by the direct influence of the public or interest groups" (p. 246).

A more recent time-series analysis of the effects of news coverage on policy attention and actions by Itzhak Yanovitsky (2001) found that the increased volume of drunk driving-related policy actions (annual amount of federal spending for curbing drunk driving and adoption of anti-drunk driving laws by all states and the District of Columbia) was largely driven by increased attention to the problem by *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and the Associated Press (AP) between 1981 and 1984. From 1985 onward, media attention waned, but policy actions continued to increase but at a decreasing rate. Yanovitsky (2001, p. 25) concluded that "intensive periods of media attention to issues are instrumental in attracting policy attention to problems that are low on policy-makers' agenda (cf. Baumgartner & Jones, 1993) and creating a sense of urgency among policy-makers to generate immediate, short-term solutions to public problems."

But he also found that as media attention declined, policy preferences gradually shifted from ad hoc solutions to long-term solutions such as investments in education and prevention programs. And he suggested that enthusiastic, one-sided treatment of the issue resulted in rapid policy change, especially when policy makers themselves were already favorably disposed to the media framing of the problem and the solutions advocated in the media.

INFLUENCES ON THE MEDIA AGENDA

Another area of agenda-setting research that seems to be gaining in popularity is the study of influences on news media agendas, a type of research Dearing and Rogers (1996) have termed *media* agenda setting and others have called "agenda building" (Gilberg et al., 1980; Lang & Lang, 1981; Weaver & Elliott, 1985). This type of research includes studies of various kinds of influences on media agendas, such as news sources, public relations efforts, and other media. It also calls into question the active agenda-setting role of the media assumed by many public agenda-setting

studies. If the media are merely passing on agendas set by other influential actors and institutions in society, is it accurate to think of the media as the agenda setters?

One model for thinking about the relationship between other agendas and the mass media agenda is an onion. The concentric layers of the onion can represent the numerous influences on the media agenda (McCombs, in press). This metaphor also illustrates the sequential nature of this process, with the influence of an outer layer being, in turn, affected by layers closer to the core of the onion. Pamela Shoemaker and Stephen Reese (1996), in their book, *Mediating the Message*, have proposed five layers of the onion that range from the prevailing societal ideology to the psychology of the individual journalist. Some of the intermediate layers representing the influence of news organizations and professional norms (media routines) of journalism constitute the sociology of news research literature studied by Warren Breed (1955b), Gaye Tuchman (1976), and Herbert Gans (1980), among others.

For this chapter, we consider only three major influences on the media agenda: (1) influential news sources such as the U.S. president, routine public relations activities, and political campaigns; (2) other media (intermedia agenda setting); and (3) the social norms and traditions of journalism.

News Sources—Presidents and PR

The single most influential news source in the United States is the president. Virtually everything that a president does is considered newsworthy. One measure of the president's agenda is his annual State of the Union address. Required by the U.S. Constitution, for more than a century this yearly report was a written document submitted to Congress. But in the late 20th century the annual address became a major media event broadcast live nationally by the television networks as it was delivered to a joint evening session of the House of Representatives and the Senate.

The format of this address in recent times—a listing of issues that the president wants the Congress to address—makes it a convenient measure of the president's priorities, or agenda. This ranking of issues can be compared with the media agenda before and after the address to get a sense of whether the president is setting the media agenda, or responding to it, or both. A comparison of President Jimmy Carter's 1978 State of the Union address with the agendas of the *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and the three national TV networks by Gilberg et al. (1980) found no significant impact of this address on the subsequent month's coverage of his eight priority issues. But there was evidence that the media coverage of these issues during the month prior to the address had influenced President Carter's agenda.

Another study of a very different president, Richard Nixon, by McCombs, Gilbert, and Eyal (1982), found that the agenda of 15 issues in Nixon's 1970 State of the Union address did predict the subsequent month's news coverage in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and two of the three national TV networks. There was no evidence that the prior media agenda influenced Nixon's agenda. Additional replications based on President Reagan's 1982 and 1985 State of the Union addresses by Wayne Wanta and colleagues (Wanta, Stephenson, Turk, & McCombs, 1989) yielded mixed evidence about the relationship between the news media agenda and the president's agenda, suggesting that the U.S. president is sometimes able to

influence the subsequent media agenda and sometimes follows earlier media and public agendas.

In a time-series analysis of *The New York Times* and *The Public Papers of the President* from 1981 to 1996, spanning the first and second Reagan terms, the single term of George Bush, and the first term of Bill Clinton, Holian (2000) found that in most instances, Republican presidents set the media agenda on Republican issues such as taxing and spending, government regulation, and crime punishment. But Republican presidents Reagan and Bush tended to follow the media emphasis on the Democratic issues of Social Security/Medicare, education, and gender equality. In other words, Reagan and Bush tended to discuss these traditionally Democratic issues publicly when others, either the media or their political opponents, placed them on the media agenda. Democrat president Clinton, on the other hand, influenced newspaper coverage of issues related to Social Security and Medicare. Thus, there is evidence from Holian's study that the U.S. president is more likely to influence the media agenda for issues traditionally "owned" by his political party.

Another important news source influence on the media agenda is the corps of public information officers and other public relations practitioners. They subsidize the efforts of news organizations to cover the news by providing substantial amounts of information, frequently in the form of press or video releases. In one of the earlier studies of this process, Leon Sigal (1973) found that nearly half of the front-page news stories in *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* from 1949 to 1969 were based on press releases, press conferences, and other information subsidies. Considering that both newspapers are major organizations with large staffs and impressive resources, their substantial reliance on public relations sources underscores the key role that information subsidies play in the formation of all media agendas.

The reporting of public health issues, such as AIDS, also reflects information subsidies provided by scientists and other expert news sources. Everett Rogers and his colleagues (Rogers, Dearing, & Chang, 1991) studied the news coverage of AIDS in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and the three TV network evening newscasts from June 1981 through December 1988. They found different stages of coverage, with the second stage from 1983 to 1985 depending mainly on scientific sources. Of the 606 news stories about AIDS in this period, 40% were based on scientific sources. In later periods, prominent personalities and government sources, as well as polls, were more influential news sources.

At the state level, Judy Turk (1986) found that news coverage of six state government agencies in Louisiana's major daily newspapers also was based substantially on information provided by those agencies' public information officers. Slightly more than half of the information subsidies provided by these officers, mostly written news releases but sometimes personal conversations, appeared in subsequent news stories. During an 8-week period the correlation between the agenda of the of the information officers and the agenda of the news stories using their information was +0.84; for all news stories on those government agencies it was +0.57. Interviews probing the reasons for this influence of information subsidies revealed the central role of journalistic norms and traditions, especially perceptions of newsworthiness.

At the local (city) level, David Weaver and Swanzy Elliott (1985) analyzed a year's worth of city council minutes and coverage of the council in the local newspaper. They found a strong overall correlation (+0.84) between the agenda of the council

and that of the local newspaper, suggesting that the local paper closely reflected the priorities of the city council, although for some issues the newspaper ranking of issues deviated considerably from the council ranking, especially those concerning arts and entertainment, utilities, animal protection, and awards. When asked about these discrepancies, the reporter covering the council for that year said that he consciously “boiled down” the subjects of education, animal protection, honors and awards, and historical events because they were not controversial and did not lend themselves to a good story. As with Judy Turk’s study in Louisiana, this local study reinforces the importance of journalistic norms and traditions, especially ideas about newsworthiness, in shaping the media agenda.

News Sources—Campaigns

Political campaigns are also an important influence on media agendas, at least in countries that hold regular elections. Even though the ultimate goal is to win elections, increasingly campaigns also try to control the media agenda in hopes of influencing the public agenda (Jamieson & Campbell 1992). Part of the media agenda is under the direct control of political campaigns. Huge amounts of money are spent on political advertising, especially on television ads, to convey candidates’ agendas and images, but campaigns also exert major efforts to influence news media agendas because these agendas are less obviously self-serving and thought to be more credible to the public than are political ads.

A comparative analysis of the 1983 British general election and the 1984 U.S. presidential election found that politicians in Britain had considerably more influence on the news agenda than their counterparts in the United States (Semetko et al., 1991). U.S. journalists had considerably more discretion to shape the campaign news agenda than did British journalists. Extensive comparisons of the Conservative, Labor, and Alliance parties’ agendas of 16 subjects with coverage of those subjects by the BBC, ITV, and five newspapers (both broadsheets and tabloids) found a median correlation of +0.62 (with a range of +0.37 to +0.84), compared to a median correlation of +0.22 (with a range of +0.03 to +0.37) in the U.S. comparisons of Democrat and Republican agendas of 11 subjects with two newspapers’ and the three national TV networks’ agendas.

This striking difference between the influence of the U.S. and that of the British campaigns on the media agendas was due, in large part, to significant cultural differences in American and British journalists’ orientations toward politicians and election campaigns. American election news coverage weighed election news against the newsworthiness of all other stories of the day, whereas the British journalists considered election campaigns as inherently important and deserving of coverage. British journalists were also more ready to use party-initiated material, whereas U.S. journalists were concerned that the political campaigns not be allowed to dictate the media agenda and that candidates not be given any “free publicity ride.”

A study of agenda setting in the 1992 U.S. presidential election by Russell Dalton and his colleagues (Dalton, Beck, Huckfeldt, & Koetzle, 1998) found high correlations among candidate platform, media-initiated, and public agendas, but a subsequent analysis using partial correlations by McCombs (in press) showed that when the media agenda is viewed as intervening between the candidate and the public agendas, the original correlation of +0.78 drops to +0.33, suggesting that there is

still considerable discretion on the part of the media to set the public agenda in a presidential election.

A comparison of television news coverage of the New Hampshire presidential primary in 1996 with the topics of the candidates' speeches during this first primary election found only a moderate degree of correlation (+0.40) between the two, supporting the earlier finding from 1984 that U.S. journalists are reluctant to let political candidates set the media agenda (Lichter & Smith, 1996). While the overwhelming majority of the candidates' speeches included comments on public issues, less than a third of the TV news reports even mentioned issues.

A more recent comparison of the agendas of the summer 2000 national convention acceptance speeches of U.S. presidential candidates Al Gore and George W. Bush with the agendas of the coverage of these speeches in five newspapers found an average correlation of +0.48 for Bush and +0.31 for Gore, suggesting that even in the reporting of major candidate speeches, the U.S. newspaper journalists were not willing to let the candidates dictate the news agenda (Mentzer, 2001). On the other hand, the consistency of the agendas of the speech coverage of the five newspapers (*USA Today*, *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *Boston Globe*, and *Los Angeles Times*) was considerably higher, with an average correlation of 0.56 for Gore's speech and 0.68 for Bush's, suggesting that journalistic views of newsworthiness were an important influence on the newspaper story agendas.

At the state level in the United States, Marilyn Roberts and Maxwell McCombs (1994) found that in the 1990 Texas gubernatorial election, the candidates' advertising agenda exerted significant influence on the campaign agendas of the local newspaper and the local television stations even after other factors were taken into account. This analysis also found that the newspaper agenda influenced the television news agenda, rather than vice versa.

Intermedia Agenda Setting

Another part of the answer to the question, "Who sets the media's agenda?" can be found by looking over time at how the changes in one medium's agenda precede or follow changes in another's. In the U.S. setting, for example, there is considerable anecdotal and some empirical evidence about the agenda-setting influence of *The New York Times* on other news media (Danielian & Reese, 1989; McCombs et al., 1991; Reese & Danielian, 1989), as well as the influence of wire service news on the gatekeeping decisions of Ohio newspaper and television wire editors (Whitney & Becker, 1982). One of the first scholars to analyze this process was sociologist Warren Breed (1955a), who wrote about newspaper opinion leaders and the process of standardization of newspaper content.

In a book about the reporting of the 1972 U.S. presidential election, Timothy Crouse (1973) made the phrase "pack journalism" famous when he wrote about how Johnny Apple of *The New York Times* set the agenda for the other journalists covering the Iowa caucuses: "He would sit down and write a lead, and they would go write leads. Then he'd change his lead when more results came in, and they'd all change theirs accordingly" (p. 85). Although Crouse referred to this as "pack journalism," it could also be thought of as a case of intermedia agenda setting.

A more recent example of large-scale intermedia agenda setting comes from a study of the reporting of the issue of global warming from 1985 to 1992 by Craig Trumbo (1995). He found that as the news coverage of this issue steadily

accelerated toward its peak in 1989, five major newspapers—including *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *the Wall Street Journal*—significantly influenced the agenda of the three national television networks. A significant intermedia agenda-setting role also was played by science publications regularly scanned by media science writers and editors.

The major wire services, such as the Associated Press, also have an important intermedia agenda-setting influence. A study of how 24 Iowa daily newspapers used the AP wire found that even though each newspaper used only a small number of the available wire stories, the patterns of coverage reflected essentially the same proportion for each category of news as the total AP file (Gold & Simmons, 1965). Likewise, a reanalysis of one of the early studies of gatekeeping (White, 1950) by a wire service editor called “Mr. Gates” found a substantial correlation (+0.64) between the combined agenda of the wire services he used and Mr. Gates’s selections for his newspaper (McCombs & Shaw, 1976). A reanalysis of a follow-up study of Mr. Gates 17 years later, when he used only a single wire service (Snider, 1967), found a correlation of +0.80 between the wire agenda and his news agenda.

An experimental study by Charles Whitney and Lee Becker (1982) also found a substantial agenda-setting influence of wire service news on experienced newspaper and television wire editors, with a correlation of +0.62 between the proportions of news stories in a large wire service file and the smaller sample selected by the editors. But in a control condition, where there were an equal number of stories in each news category, there was no common pattern of selection, either in comparison with the wire service or among the editors themselves.

Intermedia agenda setting is not limited to the United States. Using data from the 1995 election study in Navarra discussed earlier, Esteban Lopez-Escobar and his colleagues (Lopez-Escobar, Llamas, McCombs, & Lennon, 1998) also examined patterns of intermedia influence among the two local Pamplona newspapers and Telenavarra, the regional newscast produced by the national public television service. They found correlations of +0.66 and +0.70 between the newspapers and the subsequent television news agenda. Political ads were examined in the newspapers and on television. The researchers found strong evidence (+0.99) for the influence of newspaper advertising on television news descriptions of the candidates, in keeping with Roberts and McCombs’s (1994) U.S. finding that campaign advertising agendas can influence news coverage. But the Spanish study also found evidence that the descriptions of the candidates in TV advertising shifted in response to TV news descriptions (+0.78).

And, finally, in Germany, Mathes and Pfetsch (1991) studied the role of the alternative press in the agenda-building process and found that some issues spilled over from the alternative press into the established newspapers in “a multistep flow of communication within the media system” (p. 51). The liberal newspaper, *Die Zeit*, was the first established newspaper to cover a counterissue (boycotting the 1983 German census, resisting German government plans for a new ID card), followed by other liberal daily newspapers. Shortly after the liberal papers covered the issue, the pressure to discuss it became so strong that even the conservative media were forced to cover it, Mathes and Pfetsch concluded. As they put it, “Thus, the media agenda was built up in a process similar to a chain reaction. At the end of the agenda-building process, a counter-culture issue became a general, public issue” (Mathes & Pfetsch, 1991, p. 53).

The authors also found what could be called a “second-level” agenda-building effect—that the spillover effect from the alternative to the established media was

not limited to the topic or issue of coverage because “the established media on the left of the political spectrum adopted the frame of reference for presenting the issues from the alternative media” (Mathes & Pfetsch, 1991, p. 53), although this was not true for the conservative media. And they found this agenda-building process also influencing the *policy* agenda because the political elites and institutions could no longer ignore the issues that had received so much coverage in the established media.

The outcome of this intermedia agenda setting is a highly redundant news agenda, at least within a single country or culture. Across countries there may be considerable variation, as Jochen Peter and Claes de Vreese (2003) found in comparing television news programs and public surveys across five countries (Denmark, France, Germany, The Netherlands, and the United Kingdom). Some of these differences are due to different cultures and norms of politics and journalism, as Barbara Pfetsch (2001) pointed out in a recent comparative analysis of political communication cultures in Germany and the United States. Her study of political communicators and journalists in the United States and Germany as key actors in media agenda setting found more emphasis in the United States on the norms of objectivity, balanced content, diversity, and conflicts of interest and less emphasis on ethically impeccable behavior, openness, and honesty.

She also found the perceived relationship between political spokespersons and journalists to be more conflictual and less harmonious in the United States than in Germany, leading to a conclusion that in the U.S. professional journalistic norms govern interaction between political actors and journalists, whereas in Germany political norms are more important. These different norms and interactions can result in quite different political agendas, as the comparative study of British and U.S. election agendas by Holli Semetko and her colleagues (1991) has shown.

AGENDA MELDING

One of the newest approaches to agenda-setting research has been called “agenda melding” by Donald Shaw and his colleagues (Shaw, McCombs, Weaver, & Hamm, 1999). This approach centers on the receivers of media messages—various publics—and their motivations for adopting agendas and affiliating with other persons. It reverses the traditional arrow from media to public in much the same way that uses and gratifications research asks “what people do with media” rather than “what media do to people” (Blumler & Katz, 1974; Rosengren, Wenner, & Palmgreen, 1985).

Agenda melding argues that there is a strong impulse to affiliate with others in groups as one leaves the original family setting and that one often joins these groups via other people and various media. This motivation to meld with various groups is explained by a theory of social dissonance that draws on psychologist Leon Festinger’s (1957) theory of cognitive dissonance. Thus agenda melding is a theoretical elaboration of the concept of “need for orientation” (Weaver, 1977) that seeks to explain why some individuals are more interested in certain issues (and agendas) than others through a combination of perceived relevance and uncertainty. Agenda melding offers an explanation for why some persons might find some agendas more relevant than others—a felt need to affiliate with certain groups—and predicts that those who desire to join a group or community, but who have little information

about it, will be the most likely to seek information about its agenda from other persons or from various media such as newspapers and magazines. An increase in this information-seeking behavior is predicted to lead, over time, to both level 1 and level 2 agenda setting.

The theoretical foundation of agenda melding (social dissonance) draws upon several previous approaches. In addition to cognitive dissonance, it builds upon “disequilibrium” (the seeking or avoiding of information that significantly alters views; Chaffee & McDevitt, 1996), Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann’s (1984) spiral of silence, and Abraham Maslow’s (1943) hierarchy of needs. Shaw et al. (1999) argue that individuals seek affiliation with groups for many reasons, and those who join a group match their own priorities to those of the group even if they do not always agree with the dominant position of the group regarding the various issues. Whereas agenda-setting research has concentrated, for the most part, on what people learn from the media, agenda melding incorporates media agenda setting as part of a larger ongoing social learning process from various media, including other persons.

The implications of this learning process for community building are not entirely clear, but it seems likely that new media, especially the Internet, allow people to join many smaller groups that more exactly fit their interests, which can in turn lead to the fragmentation of larger groups. *The Virtual Community*, by Rheingold (1993), has found that some people are linked in communities that exist only in space. One pertinent example of such a community could be mass communication scholars who comprise an “invisible college,” residing all over the globe and only occasionally meeting in the same geographic place. In the past, media agenda setting has been found to be an integrating force, with those frequently exposed to newspapers and television news more likely to agree on a common set of issues as important than those not frequently exposed, regardless of most demographics (Lopez-Escobar, Llamas, & McCombs, 1998; Shaw & Martin, 1992). As individuals are increasingly free to choose their own agendas via the Internet, and as fewer people pay regular attention to newspapers and TV news, this traditional function of media agenda setting seems likely to decline.

CONCLUSIONS

This review of agenda-setting studies conducted in Britain, Germany, Israel, Italy, Japan, Spain, Taiwan, and the United States illustrates not only an expansion of this research geographically, but also an expansion of scope from first-level agenda setting (*what* issues the media emphasize and the public cares about) to second-level (*how* issues and political actors are reported and perceived). A count of the number of research articles indexed in *Communication Abstracts* using the concept of agenda setting shows an increase from 36 in the first half of the 1980s to 75 in the first half of the 1990s, with a drop to 54 in the second half of the 1990s. At the same time, the number of articles mentioning framing increased dramatically, from only 3 in the first half of the 1990s to 30 in the second half, suggesting a surge of interest in this concept.

There is also considerable concern now with priming and other consequences of agenda setting, as well as how the media agenda at both levels is determined and why some individuals are more or less interested in adopting various agendas.

This chapter has argued for a distinction between second-level agenda setting and framing, even though there are a number of similarities between the two. It has also argued that there may be little value in making a distinction between the salience and the perceived importance of issues in studies of agenda setting and priming. It has tried to shed some new light on the consequences of agenda setting for public opinion and behavior, as well as for public policy, and on the factors that shape media agendas. And it has briefly reviewed the new concept of agenda melding and the theory of social dissonance as proposed by Donald Shaw and his colleagues to try to explain why some people are more or less likely to adopt different agendas.

Some would argue that this expansion of the concept of agenda setting obscures its original meaning and unnecessarily intrudes into other realms of mass communication research, such as framing, priming, the construction of meaning, policy making, gatekeeping, and other approaches. We regard this expansion as a natural outcome of the elaboration of a theoretical approach over time, which should be a goal of theory building in any field. This does not mean that the agenda-setting approach should replace other theoretical approaches, but there does seem to be value in pointing out the areas of overlap between various theoretical perspectives and moving on to a greater synthesis.

As McCombs (1997) has written,

One of the strengths of agenda-setting theory that has prompted its continuing growth over the years is its compatibility and complementarity with a variety of other social science concepts and theories. . . . Incorporated concepts include gatekeeping and status conferral. Conceptual complements include the spiral of silence and cultivation analysis. Explication of a second level of agenda setting, an agenda of ideas about the topics in the news, links agenda setting with a major contemporary concept, *framing*. (p. 5).

In addition, the theoretical foundations of agenda melding draw upon cognitive dissonance, disequilibrium, and Maslow's hierarchy of needs.

Thinking about communication in terms of the salience of objects and attributes is, of course, only one way of understanding its complexities, but over the past three decades it has proven to be a useful approach that seems to hold out more promise for integrating the field than most others. Clearly more research is needed to clarify the similarities and differences between second-level agenda setting and framing, between the salience and the perceived importance of issues and attributes, and the conditions under which media agendas are likely to influence not only public, but also policy makers' agendas.

Whether this research should be conducted solely at the psychological, or even biological, level (in the case of information processing) is questionable. Agenda-setting can be conceptualized as a societal-level process as well as an individual-level one. Harold Lasswell (1948) argued more than 50 years ago that mass communication has three broad social roles—surveillance of the larger environment, facilitation of consensus among the segments of society, and transmission of the social culture. Clearly, media agendas are an important source of surveillance of the larger environment that is often outside the direct personal experience of most people. But there is also evidence that media agenda setting has significant implications for societal consensus and transmission of social culture.

As mentioned earlier, Donald Shaw and Shannon Martin (1992) found evidence of a media role in building consensus among different groups in society in the North Carolina Poll. Their comparison of the issue agendas of men and women who read a daily newspaper infrequently yielded a correlation of +0.55. For those who read a newspaper occasionally, it increased to +0.80, and for those who read frequently, the agendas were identical (+1.0 correlation). Similar patterns of increased agreement about the most important issues facing the nation as a result of more frequent exposure to news media were found in comparisons of young and old and Blacks and Whites, for both newspapers and television news. This consensus-building function of newspapers and television news has also been found in Spain (Lopez-Escobar, Llamas, & McCombs, 1998) and in Taiwan (Chiang, 1995).

Further evidence of this function was found by Jian-Hua Zhu and William Borson (1997) in their study of 35 Gallup surveys containing a question about the most important problem facing the nation between 1977 and 1986. They divided the answers to this question by differing educational and income levels to check on possible differences in issue priorities among these groups. They found that the differences between the groups were much smaller than the differences over time. And in comparing the agendas of the different groups with the number of TV news stories about these issues, they concluded (p. 82) that "the media agenda-setting effects are not manifested in creating different levels of salience among individuals, but are evident at driving the salience of *all* individuals up and down over time."

Although these comparisons of demographic groups are useful in documenting a consensus-building role of media agenda setting, further research on this media role should compare groups defined by other lifestyle and psychographic measures to test the limits of this process. Demographics are very broad-brush measures of today's segments of society.

Finally, the transmission of culture is also related to the agenda-setting process. One can conceive of an agenda of beliefs or values concerning democratic governance that is more important than agendas of specific issues and attributes. For example, in the United States, where government is not high on the personal agenda of most citizens, one of the most significant agenda-setting roles of mass media may be to stimulate interest in elections and voting. During the 1976 presidential election, in a nine-wave panel study of voters, David Weaver and his colleagues (1981) found that exposure to television news in the late spring stimulated political interest in the summer and fall months leading up to the November election.

Other examples of the transmission of culture include media portrayals of the past, with differing levels of emphasis on certain selected events and specific aspects of these events (Wilke, 1995). These media include popular books and school textbooks as well as films and the news media. Schools are also an important agenda setter for collective memories, emphasizing certain aspects of a society's past.

In short, there are many different agendas in society and many different agenda setters, including family and friends, schools, and the media. Not all agenda-setting processes should be analyzed at the psychological level. Some must be studied at the societal or cultural level to gain a richer understanding of how these processes occur and the forces that shape them. Regardless of level of analysis, however, it seems clear from the studies reviewed here that the various communication media are among the most important agenda setters of 21st-century societies, whether or not they seek this role.

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